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## Assessing the Impact of a Faculty Book Club on Self-Reflection and Teaching Practice

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### **Abstract:**

*Andrews University, a small liberal arts institution, has had a Faculty Book Club (FBC) for the past three years, where each semester interested faculty read a scholarly book on higher education pedagogy and meet three times to discuss ideas from the current book. We wanted to assess the impact of FBC on the way teachers thought about teaching and on how it impacted their actual classroom teaching practice, so we conducted qualitative interviews with eight FBC participants and analyzed the results. It appears that, for relatively low cost, FBC encouraged changes in both self-reflection about teaching and actual teaching practice, and it additionally forged bonds between teachers across campus and is strengthening the teaching culture at the University.*

### **Key Words:**

Faculty Book Club; Self-Reflection; Teaching Practice; Cost.

### **Biographies**

**Anneris Coria-Navia** is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Andrews University. She also serves as the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. She received her doctorate in education from the University of Southern California. She currently teaches courses in Curriculum and Instruction and Teacher Preparation. Her research interests focus on the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, social networks of beginning teachers, and strategies for strengthening learning organizations.

**Scott Moncrieff** is a Professor of English at Andrews University. He teaches in the areas of 19th century British literature, literary theory, creative writing, and composition, and has published scholarly articles in the area of Victorian literature, and poetry. He received his PhD from University of California, Riverside.

## **Introduction**

This paper presents the results of eight in-depth interviews conducted at a small liberal arts institution about the impact of a Faculty Book Club (FBC) on participants' self-reflection about their teaching and their teaching practice. The results identified at least six areas in which faculty members have benefitted by participating in FBC. FBC 1) provided the primary means for educating participants on the scholarship of teaching; 2) led to changes in teaching practice; 3) led to faculty sharing insights about effective learning with students; 4) created desirable networking opportunities with faculty from diverse disciplines, as well as a forum for exchanging ideas; 5) increased accountability of faculty to work at professional development in teaching; 6) increased the likelihood that faculty will engage in research in the scholarship of teaching. We suggest that among many professional development opportunities, such as in-service training and faculty development groups with specific tasks, FBCs can provide a significant impact that benefits faculty (and, by extension, students) at a small financial cost and with a modest investment of administrative capital.

In the last few decades, there has been a growing awareness in higher education of the importance of faculty development and support in the area of teaching and learning. Nationally and globally, institutions have created frameworks and formal support measures to encourage faculty to improve their teaching. Accrediting agencies are also paying more attention to the efforts institutions make to support faculty in their teaching responsibilities. Simha and Teodorescu (2017) summarized the criteria used by several accrediting associations in relationship to the support of effective teaching. They affirm that there is an obligation on the part of the institution to make a concerted effort to support faculty in teaching and that these programs should ensure access to all faculty and show evidence of transformative practices.

The attempts to formalize the support for faculty development in teaching take several forms and scales. Some institutions have enough resources to send faculty to conferences focused on the pedagogy of teaching in their disciplines. Other institutions hire consultants or invite recognized pedagogues to provide training and support to their faculty. Some have well-developed centers for teaching and learning. There are also many schools like ours, who are starting to explore best and most effective practices within budget constraints and have to find ways to provide access and support to all faculty within modest resources. Baumer states that "often small steps and innovative institutional practices can make a significant difference in faculty development, and in support for shaping the next generation of faculty" (2005). In our institution, "small steps" describes our current state as we move towards the creation of a comprehensive professional development plan to support faculty in teaching. However, as we look into how the Center for Teaching and Learning and the professional development plan will be shaped and formed for the future, we must carefully evaluate the impact of our current offerings in promoting teaching effectiveness and student learning. As Baumer notes, when describing the University of Chicago's professional development structure, competition for and availability of funds drives access and availability of resources. Many institutions face this challenge when prioritizing the use of funds. We argue that FBCs are a cost effective and efficient model to support faculty in the developing a collective culture of improvement in teaching. Through FBCs, conversations about teaching are formalized and encouraged, creating a more level playing field for faculty

from a variety of backgrounds, in all stages of their career, and with varied responsibilities, to form learning communities based on a common institutional goal of designing and delivering engaging teaching practices. Unlike internal institutional grants for research which are competitive and fewer in number, FBC serves as a space where all faculty have equal access to resources, new ideas, and support.

FBCs can be considered a type of professional learning community. Considerable work has been done on the positive effects of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in K-12 contexts. Hord and Cowan (1999) documented that PLCs “increased focus on the teacher, the teacher’s knowledge, instructional strategies, and the way teachers relate with the learner.” They go on to argue that PLCs, with their focus on mutual learning and support, can effectively promote the teacher improvement in the classroom.

Similar to the concept of PLCs in K-12 are Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), the preferred term for higher education work groups of this type. Cox (2004) defines a faculty learning community as a group of faculty and staff who work collaboratively to address an aspect related to the improvement of teaching and learning. He argues that “faculty learning communities create connections for isolated teachers, establish networks for those pursuing pedagogical issues, meet early-career faculty expectations for community, foster multidisciplinary curricula, and begin to bring community to higher education.” In addition, FLCs have been shown to be effective in helping educators gain insight into their practices and grow in their teaching ability, and they also improve faculty cohesion, student retention and satisfaction (Wood, 2000). FLCs have increased faculty interest in teaching and increased use of effective methods of teaching, improved student learning outcomes, and had positive effects on the promotion of the scholarship of teaching (Spyker, 2006). Furthermore, a study by Sicut, et al (2014) suggests that by documenting involvement and engagement and evidencing its benefits, faculty are better positioned to show how participation in FLCs has contributed to their schools’ expectations for scholarship, teaching, and service. The authors propose that FLCs foster what they call interprofessional collaboration. They describe it as follows:

“The FLC is a true gestalt. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In a culture that has traditionally accepted division among schools and disciplines, the opportunity for regular collaboration among professionals with a common interest in helping members of their faculty improve their teaching effectiveness has increased communication, innovation, and the resources available to all. Through our FLC, we have developed relationships across disciplines, increased our knowledge and perspectives, created resources that contributed to scholarship in faculty development, and jointly collaborated on projects that benefit us all” (Sicut, et. al, 2014).

Further research into the effects of professional learning communities has been driven by the potential benefits that these communities can have on student achievement (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). The authors express that “peer collaboration...has the potential of transforming teaching practices in ways that will bring about higher rates of student achievement...[and] results.” They suggest that the intentional effort of teachers, learning from one another in a concentrated effort to improve their practice, has important implications for how universities utilize the full

potential of their faculty. Smith, et al. (2008), report that the Howard University FLC model had the most evident impact in innovation, effective planning, implementation, and assessment of programs aimed to improve academic achievement and retention of underrepresented and underserved student populations. These results are very promising and encouraging for our institution, as we serve a considerable number of minority and international students.

Faculty Book Clubs are a type of learning community, and yet the literature does not document whether they make meaningful contributions to faculty professional development in higher education. There are a few studies that document the effectiveness of pedagogy-oriented reading groups in middle schools and high schools contexts, but the literature in higher education is limited. One study in the medical field suggests that journal clubs have a positive effect on increasing collegiality, developing professional identity, and improving clinical practice. Additionally, there is a potential for journal clubs to improve professionalism, professional ethics, and understanding of the contextual nature of a physician's work (Cave & Clandinin, 2007). Medina (2010) found that an important component of faculty interest in participating in a book club was the ability to fit it within the workday hours, but no study we identified qualitatively investigates the impact of a pedagogically-oriented faculty reading group. Our purpose when designing this study was to document the effectiveness of a relatively low-cost activity on the campus culture of dialogue about and support for teaching.

### **Our Program**

Our institution did not have a formalized way of supporting faculty in their teaching responsibilities until a director of training and development, whose responsibilities were more aligned with staff training, realized the need and decided to create opportunities for an ongoing dialogue about higher education pedagogy in the form of a Faculty Book Club. Our FBC has been in existence since Fall, 2015. Initially, a group of three facilitators (originally not all faculty) chose the books and created questions for discussion. Currently, faculty from across campus facilitate the discussions, and the book is chosen by requesting suggestions from the faculty facilitators (who are chosen because of their commitment to the mission of FBC), or through ideas that come to the inbox of the Center for Teaching and Learning. At the beginning of the term, all faculty (full-time, part-time, and adjunct) and graduate students with teaching responsibilities are invited by email to participate in FBC, with a current maximum of thirty participants, which are then divided into three groups of approximately ten participants each. Faculty sign up through an Eventbrite website and commit to attending three discussion sessions per semester. The facilitators prepare the questions for discussion and lead the discussion when the participants meet. We have been intentional about holding sessions at staggered times during the lunch hour (11:45, 12:00, and 12:15) to accommodate a variety of teaching schedules. Next year we plan to add a breakfast session to accommodate additional schedules. The institution provides a meal and the book to 25-30 faculty members per semester. The approximate cost for this professional development event (books and meals) is \$1,400 per semester for 25-30 faculty members. The books used so far (and the term they were used) are as follows: *Leaving the Lectern*, by Dean A. McManus (Spring 2015); *What the Best College Teachers Do*, by Ken Bain (Fall 2015); *The Courage to Teach*, by Parker Palmer (Spring 2016); *Small*

*Teaching*, by James Lang (Fall 2016); *Make It Stick*, by Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel (Spring 2017).

The feedback about FBC that we have received from faculty through a Class Climate survey instrument was very positive. Most semesters FBC has been near or at capacity. The general feedback has centered around positive ideas for improved teaching, accountability to self-educate, opportunities for discussion and for building relationships with faculty across disciplines, and time for fellowship around a good meal. We used this information to give us a preliminary snapshot of faculty perceptions about FBC. The surveys were somewhat helpful, but it was clear that we needed a more robust inquiry to see if the reading, discussions, and networking opportunities were having a substantial impact on faculty self-reflection and practice.

## Methodology

We sent an invitation email to all faculty that had attended at least two sessions of FBC, asking them to send 2-3 sentences to describe the impact (whether large or small) of FBC on their teaching practices. We stated in the email that those who responded would be invited to a 20-30-minute interview. The interview questions touched upon themes of self-reflection, the impact of FBC on teaching practices, actual changes made as a result of participation in FBC, characteristics of good teaching, networking, the scholarship of teaching, planning, and professional growth in general. A sample questionnaire is included in the appendix. We conducted and transcribed eight semi-structured interviews with the faculty who agreed to participate, then coded emerging themes.

## Results

1. FBC books in all cases represented the majority of books on higher education teaching read by participants. Of our eight interviewees, none had read more than two books that related to higher education pedagogy outside of FBC, with most having read one or none. On the other hand, most had read four books out of a possible five from FBC, and some had read all five.

2. All participants had modified class procedures based on FBC reading. The most common changes had to do with creating additional opportunities for retrieval, a concept emphasized in both *Make It Stick* and *Small Teaching*. Also mentioned were classroom uses of interleaving, spaced practice, generation and prediction, as well as quizzes that focused not just on the most recent readings for the class, but also asked questions relating to earlier course material (a strategy which combines interleaving and spaced practice as methods of retrieval), and making the syllabus more like an invitation to a feast, rather than predominantly a series of warnings on policies (from *What the Best Teachers Do*).

3. Additionally, several interviewees mentioned that they had shared with students some of what they had learned from FBC books about effective study methods (particularly from *Make It Stick*). One teacher created an optional “how to study for . . .” class for a one hour credit for his Foundations of Biology course, a roadblock course for some students in the major. Another teacher added a section to her class’s online course management system on “how to study for this class.” A third teacher says she

relates some of the how-to-study-more-effectively concepts to her students and her advisees.

4. All interviewees also mentioned that FBC was the only (or one of the few) places where they could talk shop about teaching with colleagues from around campus and that they felt this support was beneficial and important. Phrases such as “interdisciplinary composition,” “cross-pollination,” and “forming relationships,” were used. A lot of teaching is a solitary business (as far as interacting with colleagues in the classroom). FBC lessens this somewhat.

5. We asked about the differential value of having the FBC sessions, as opposed to just purchasing the book and distributing it to faculty. The overwhelming response was that using the books with FBC discussions increased accountability and that participants considered themselves “much more” likely to read the book because of their responsibility to the group for participating in the discussion. We can compare FBC diligence to the reading of Faculty Focus, the free higher education pedagogy newsletter we get twice a week in our email inboxes. It has good articles written by practicing professionals, often including research apparatus. It’s a valuable resource, and we occasionally read it. However, with no pressing reason to take the 10 minutes to read the articles, we often put them in a “pedagogy” folder where they remain, unread, waiting for some mythical future moment with no pressing demands.

In addition to increasing accountability, FBC added the opportunity to see how other faculty had applied some of the ideas in the classroom, and provided reinforcement of concepts studied. FBC also kept “pedagogical awareness” in the forefront of teachers’ minds. “You don’t want to get stuck,” said one teacher. “I don’t want to get in a rut in my teaching,” said another. A third noted that he had a tendency to teach the way he was taught, with the implication that FBC foregrounded potential useful modifications. A fourth said “When I hear my colleagues say ‘yeah I do this, and I do this,’ I’m like ‘oh, I do that. I’m on the right track.’ It gives me a lot of confidence. The converse is true when they make comments about ‘I do this.’ And I’m thinking ‘ooh, I’m not doing that. Maybe I need to go back and evaluate what I’m doing.’ I just really love that interaction.”

6. None of the interviewees had previously published research on the scholarship of teaching. However, reading the FBC books made it at least somewhat more likely that they would undertake such a project in the future. One participant was actually working on such a topic, and several others had ideas about what they might like to study as a possible scholarship of teaching study. Fifteen of the presenters at our third annual Scholarship of Teaching Conference happened to be alumni of our FBC.

## **Discussion**

**Result 1** suggests that many or even most faculty are unlikely to read books about higher ed pedagogy on their own. Busy keeping up with current classes, research, and service responsibilities this is not particularly surprising, though it is of concern for the quality of teaching (Burbank 2010, Levine et al., 2007; Lyons, Becky & Ray, 2014). Many faculty members prioritize research and publications even in teaching institutions as more often than not, it is the only way to advance. In these cases, professional development activities are not seen as a priority (Levine et al., 2007). Additionally, higher ed faculty have never been required to be certified to teach in the manner of

secondary and primary teachers, and have typically had little formal teacher training. True, many have served as TA's in grad school, and some have been personally and effectively mentored in their teaching, but this is likely the exception rather than the rule. TA's are often given a group syllabus and may have periodic meetings with a TA coordinator, and while this is certainly better than nothing, it is underwhelming as a launching pad for career-long excellence in teaching.

As teaching forms the primary responsibility of the great majority of faculty, even the research professors at our university (who have a one class reduction per semester), we consider it to be of high importance that faculty continue to develop their abilities as teachers. This can and does happen to a certain extent simply through repeated exposure to teaching, especially when tied to careful assessment of and thoughtful reflection on teaching, followed by modification. However, reading current research on higher ed pedagogy and discussing ideas and practices with colleagues will certainly enlarge and improve the idea pool for any faculty member to use in deciding how and why to make changes in teaching methods.

**Result 2** demonstrates the efficacy of FBC in promoting change. It suggests that most or all teachers will make changes when presented with current research on effective teaching methods and a cohort of supportive colleagues who share stories about changes that they have made. It would be interesting to compare the likelihood of significant change as a response to our beginning of the year professional development meetings to change as a result of FBC. Good ideas are presented at the whole campus meetings, but with a one-and-done format and the pressures of simply getting a new school year off the ground, change at this point requires a remarkable amount of self-discipline and follow-up by the individual teacher. On the other hand, the semester-long, ongoing format of FBC allows teachers the opportunity to have ideas raised, reinforced, discussed, and integrated as they see fit during term or with adequate lead time for the next semester. It also means that ideas about good teaching are "always" circulating in their minds, and at the right moment they can be available for implementation. There are examples of institutions that have used book clubs as step 1 in change processes. For example, Levine et al. (2007) document the case of Central Connecticut State University's change process that included the collective reading of a book as step one. A study by Marshall (2001) showed how book clubs had a positive impact in curricular change at the high school level inspiring teachers to modify and add literature to their courses.

Result 3 suggests the ripple effect of having a cohort of teachers on campus who are actively reading and thinking about effective teaching methods. The interviews showed that the effects have expanded to include knowledge and strategy sharing with students, and it presumably has had some effect in sharing ideas with colleagues who are not part of FBC. We know that has happened in our case. Thinking about how students can study more effectively also helps the teacher to think about how to use class time more effectively. Burbank (2010) reported that teachers were likely to have conversations with their colleagues about what they were learning in the book club even if those colleagues were not attending the discussions. She says, "For these teachers, the book club experience provided an opportunity to extend their professional development beyond the confines of their "official" club meetings (64).



**Result 4** highlights the need for faculty to have time to bond together while talking shop. The semi-structured format with layers of informality—eating a meal, getting acquainted—interleaved with intention—a discussion leader, printed questions, an expectation that participants are reading the book—seemed to produce an excellent learning environment and a positive attitude toward the enterprise as a whole. Appreciation for the cross-campus interaction with colleagues, from different disciplines and at different points of experience in the teaching career, was one of the most-cited positives of FBC. It was also noted by participants that there is really nothing parallel or similar to FBC for providing such experience on this campus. Next year our Center for Teaching Excellence plans to implement a formative peer feedback classroom visitation pool, which will also speak to this need in a somewhat different way. Boose, David, and Hutchings (2016) studied the impact of the learning community on the faculty at Gonzaga University. They found that faculty “talked about how the experience made a difference to them as individuals, but also how they increasingly saw the group as a kind of alternative community to which they did not have access in the daily routines of their academic lives” (2). They also report that “nearly all of them told us in an end-of-program reflective writing activity that “the most useful” aspect of the experience was the opportunity to be part of a group that worked together on the challenging issues of teaching and learning” (6).

**Result 5** suggests that many teachers may be subject to doing things the same way time after time, simply as a coping mechanism to keep up with a demanding job, or because—not being students any longer—they are not exposed to multiple teaching models, so they become embedded in their established practices. FBC provides a vital corrective to this stagnation by providing a smorgasbord of fresh ideas to choose from, and not just subjective suggestions, but researched and empirically tested strategies.

Hutchings, Huber, and Anthony (2011) argue that forms of scholarship regarding teaching and learning, due to their inquiry model, are prone to innovation and those who participate are seeking best-practice methods for the classroom. It is within this context of “faculty-driven scholarship” that Levine et al. (2007) report their book club “could just as easily have been an institutionally sponsored teaching workshop, or an inspiring speech by a guest educator” (4). This book club was the progenitor for creating a structure of empirically based strategies to improve student learning within their institution. This was the case at our institution as well and it was energizing to many teachers.

**Result 6** suggests that FBC leads to critical thinking about empirically addressing improved teaching, with a number of scholarly projects already presented and others in the pipeline. Boose, David, and Hutchings argue that engaging in the scholarship of teaching reframes the power and meaning of the work inspired by the conversations among the faculty participants. They suggest “that a learning community dedicated to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning may indeed lead to tangible gains in learning and retention (and of course those matter greatly), but that it’s more distinctive contribution lies in its ability to foster a sense of identity and perspective among educators that allows both a critical evaluation of, and a richer participation in, the work of higher learning” (9)

## Conclusion

We can confidently state that our FBC has provided a highly valuable service for the campus of Andrews University. It is, at present, a unique meeting place for cross-campus discussions of how to improve teaching, as well as a reading group which is providing the most important avenue for reading research about best practices in higher education pedagogy. Given that excellent teaching is of such high importance to the mission of the University, it is also of high importance to continue and improve FBC, as well as to provide other ongoing professional development opportunities to facilitate improved teaching on campus. As an institution with limited funding for professional development and a Center for Teaching and Learning in its infancy, the priority of finding ways to leverage collaboration and peer support through cost effective means is paramount. FBC has proven to be more than cost-effective. It was an inspiring and productive way to bring faculty together, to foster relationships, and to share practice. The limited sample size of our study, and the fact that participants volunteered rather than being randomly selected, means that our participant sample may not accurately represent the experience of all those who have attended FBC. Nevertheless, it does represent the experience of a significant number within that group. Further research can be undertaken by individual faculty or faculty teams to measure the efficacy of particular changes of teaching practice on student learning. A book. A meal. Building connections with colleagues. For our institution, FBC has been one good step toward supporting faculty teaching through scholarship.

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### **APPENDIX**

1. What FBC books have you read?
2. What ideas from any of the books have seemed most important to you, or changed the way you think about teaching?
3. How does having the informal discussions at FBC impact your thinking about or actual actions as a teacher?
4. When you set out to plan a class, what are the key factors you keep in mind to guide your planning?
5. What changes have you made in the way you teach as a result of your participation in the FBC? How is that going?
6. How would you summarize the impact on your teaching of participating in FBC?
7. Other possible areas of discussion:
8. Relationship with colleagues
9. Self-reflection (if not included implicitly)
10. Scholarship of teaching (any interest as a result of FBC?)
11. Have you had any ideas about potential research on the scholarship of teaching, as a result of reading and discussion at FBC?
12. Does FBC support of the institution's mission?
13. Does it increase your work satisfaction?
14. What is different about your teaching from the early days of your career? Are there things you do more of or less of?